

## Redemption of the Body

This Fall did not mark the destruction of the body and physical world, but allowed the depths of God's wisdom and love to raise these to an unprecedented dignity: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.'<sup>12</sup> God took on a human body, so that he could speak our own language, which included this 'language of the body.' It was through his body that he most perfectly made visible the invisible love of God. Jesus, in a celibate way, gave up his body for his bride, the Church, when, just before he 'consummated' this supernatural marriage on the Cross, he said, 'This is my body, given up for you...'<sup>13</sup> Like a groom and bride make a gift of their whole selves in marriage, Christ gave his self for his bride.<sup>14</sup> And this is the most fruitful, life-giving union in the universe! Jesus' bride, the Church, now daily gives spiritual birth to her children through the Sacraments, made possible by her husband's seed of life dwelling within her. Earthly love, when found in its truest form, is now not only the image of heavenly love in its creative aspect (as recorded in Genesis), but also in its redemptive aspect (as recorded in the New Testament).

Christianity is the religion of the Incarnation – God's mystery revealed in human flesh. The study of God revealed through the study of man is nothing other than *the theology of the body*. Man is not God, but Jesus is the 'God-Man'. Christ took on our humanity so that the Church may give birth to spiritual children. In fact John tells us that the way to identify the antichrist is he who denies Christ is come 'in the flesh.'<sup>15</sup> God is creator of the flesh and Christ took on flesh, suffered and died in the flesh, was resurrected in the flesh and ascended to heaven in the flesh. The flesh is the key to our salvation. Christianity is not about demonising the body, it is about divinising the body.<sup>16</sup>

### What is the source of the problem: my heart or the law?

Blessed John Paul II begins his large discussion by analysing the three major occasions in the Gospels where Jesus explicitly dealt with the issue of marriage, adultery and divorce.<sup>17</sup> After analysing them in depth individually, he presents a unified account in which Jesus points out to the reader God's original plan for humanity and its final goal – perfect happiness with God (heaven). Christ calls us to see that the problems we encounter are not due to the 'codes' of sexual morality, but due to our 'hardness of heart.' Thus, if we honestly reflect on the depths and truth of our desires, we will find seeds of both 'the beginning' and our heavenly destiny, of which marriage is a reflection. Hence his mission is to transform our hearts to enable us to be free to fulfil God's plan for us and so attain perfect happiness.

God created sexual desire to be the desire to love as he loves, not a compulsive urge which impedes freedom, demanding physical or emotional satisfaction as soon as possible. This is the internal experience of lust. Hence for John Paul II, it was the proper purpose of freedom which needed to be grasped before love is possible. Society talks a lot about sexual freedom but defines it very basically along the lines

of 'as long as it's consensual and you use 'protection', go for it.' This doesn't promote freedom, it promotes addiction. It creates chains. Is an alcoholic who can't say 'no' to his next drink free or in chains? Freedom is the prerequisite of love. If you can't say 'no', then your 'yes' means nothing. Before one is able to say, 'I give myself to you', one must first be in control of oneself. Hence the irreplaceable need for the virtue of chastity.<sup>18</sup> True freedom is not abandoning the demand for chastity, but rather fulfilling it. Some think, 'Well if I toss away the rules and not listen to anyone then I'll be free.' This does not mean you are free, but rather demonstrates that you are in chains. True freedom is being free from *the internal constraints* which hurt our ability to choose what is truly good.

If today we see so much conflict in the realm of sexuality, Christ challenges us to see that 'in the beginning' it wasn't so. Before sin was perfect harmony. And if this is truly the case, the Church's moral teachings aren't imposed from the outside, but are stamped within us. Therefore *the heart* is where we fail to experience the happiness that God has in store.<sup>19</sup> A hard heart is closed to the love of God. If this is the case, you cannot live the love of God in your body because you do not have the love of God dwelling in your body. You cannot give what you do not have.

### Conclusion - Difficult Does Not Mean False

Yet these words of Christ are not said to condemn, but to reactivate this deeper heritage of our humanity. It is easy to be disheartened and possibly reject the truth about ourselves because it is difficult, but this cannot lead to happiness. Simply because something is difficult, it doesn't mean it is wrong or impossible. Rather, the Good News of the Gospel is that this inner transformation of our heart by God's grace is possible when we turn to Christ and, as this occurs, we will begin to truly know and love the truth of our humanity and God's gracious plan for us.

### INFORM

#### Questions:

1. What does it mean to say that the body makes invisible realities visible?
2. How does the complementarity of the sexes reflect the image of God?
3. "If you cannot say 'no', your 'yes' means nothing." What does this saying reveal about the relationship between self-control and love?

<sup>12</sup> John 1:14

<sup>13</sup> Matt 26:26

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 5:23-32

<sup>15</sup> 2 John 1:7

<sup>16</sup> 2 Peter 1:4 & Romans 8:23

<sup>17</sup> Matt 5:27-28, 19:3-9 & 22:23-30

<sup>18</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Man And Woman He Created Them*, p.644

<sup>19</sup> Matt 15:17-20 & 23:25

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# INFORM

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## THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

Discovering the beauty of  
God's design for humanity  
in an age of confusion.



147

In this article, Christian Stephens provides us with an overview of Blessed John Paul II's magnificent teaching on the Theology of the Body.

## Introduction

One has only to listen to the radio for several minutes to discover a relentlessly common theme. There are so many songs about the 'joy of finding love', the pain and heartache when it goes wrong, about the person they love 'being all that matters' or about the person they used to love not mattering. The reason so much of human creativity is saturated with this theme is that the desire to love and be loved is fundamental to human existence.<sup>1</sup>

This hunger is fundamentally a good thing as it is one dimension of the drive and inspiration towards perfect happiness. Yet in the reality of our fallen nature this hunger can be misdirected: we find ourselves attracted to persons, things or places which only offer a *counterfeit of love*, or we even forget what we were hungry for in the first place! Difficulties in the realm of love are as old as Adam, yet many sense that our current period in history is an exceptional smorgasbord of widespread confusion about all things sexual. While previous generations may have sown the seeds for the many ideas that we hold today, it is the current generations who are reaping the harvest and it is a *costly* one! They are paying with many things including their marriages (approx. 50,000 divorces per year<sup>2</sup>) and their hearts (pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry). The search for love *apart from truth* has left a trail of destruction.

The origin of society is the family and the origin of the family is marriage, or the sexual union between man and woman. When that union is moving towards love and life, it builds *marriages* and *families* that live love and life, which in turn builds *cultures* of love and life. When that fundamental relationship fractures, it causes broken families which, in turn, cause a broken culture. The solution is not simply 'trying harder', but actually re-learning what on earth the Book of Genesis means when it records that 'male and female he (God) created them.'<sup>3</sup> Without this reflection and knowledge, all the best intentions in the world will not suffice.

### 'Peter... Feed my sheep' (John 21:17)

Reflecting on being the first non-Italian Pope in 455 years and the first Slavic Pope ever, Blessed John Paul II once commented, 'if the Holy Spirit had seen fit to call the Bishop of Kraków to the office of Bishop of Rome and pastor of the Universal Church, there must have been something in (my) experience that was useful for others.'<sup>4</sup> There was. Throughout his entire priesthood, he had shown a special interest in the dignity of love and life, as well as the rediscovery of the 'subjective dimension' of the Church's objective truth.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the rediscovery of how reflecting on the interior, personal experience of the human being's search for love proclaims the truth about man, the world and God. This was what he had to offer to a desperate world in difficult times.

From the beginning of his Pontificate, between the years 1979 and 1982, John Paul II used 128 of his Wednesday

audiences to the effort of providing 'an appropriate answer' to questions of sexuality by 'concentrating on the biblical and personalistic aspects.'<sup>6</sup> He reflected on over 1043 verses of Scripture and integrated them not only with the timeless philosophy of the great thinkers of history (headed by St Thomas Aquinas), but also the best of modern thought. John Paul II saw that the only way forward for Catholics (and therefore for the world) was not a compromise of orthodox moral principles, but a revisiting and deepening of their rationale. He thus shifted the discussion from, 'How far can I go?' to 'What's the meaning of life? What does it mean to be human? Why are we sexual in the first place?' In the same way as Jesus constantly redirected the attention of his questioners to deeper truths, John Paul II shifted discussion of sexual morality from legalism and mere rules to freedom, love and truth. How do we use our freedom to fulfil ourselves? Curiosity about sexuality actually leads us into the heart of the meaning of life as long as we stay on track. It is not enough for a rational creature to simply be able to recount the 'nos' of Church teaching, they must understand the *why behind the what*. Only then does the truth become beautiful and our 'hardness of heart' begin to turn to a 'heart of flesh.'<sup>7</sup>

### Sexual morality: limiting or opening horizons?

When people get desperate, their better judgment is overridden – it is no different in the realm of sexuality. The manifestations of 'starving for love' are so numerous it's not worth recounting, and the aftermath of fear, loneliness, hurt and resentment are all too common. If no one told you about the banquet that God offers, are you going to go to the trouble of saving your money, not having snacks to ruin your appetite, having a shower, getting all dressed up and brushing your teeth? Of course not!

John Paul II calls out to a society crawling around for scraps of love, and echoing the voice of Christ says, 'Be not afraid! The banquet is open! Rise and walk!' But the way to do this is not to focus on 'avoiding' the scraps, which is as practical as trying not think about something! The way to do this is to realise the very purpose of my sexuality: to reflect on what it means to be a sexual being whose very desire to give and receive love is stamped in our bodies as male and female. >



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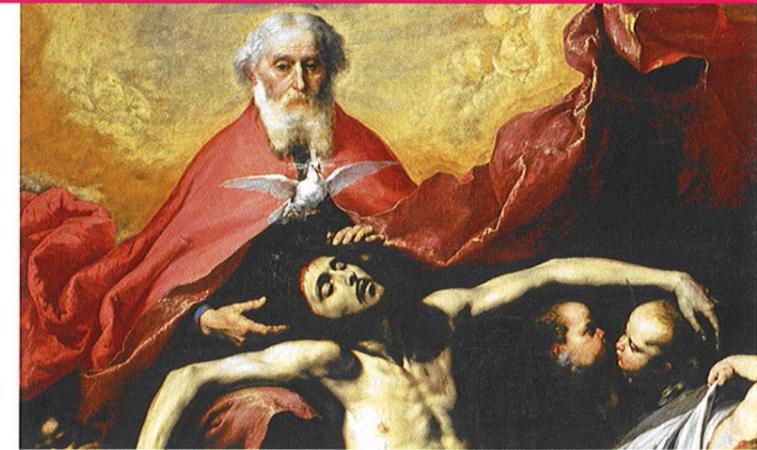
### Making visible the invisible

Man and woman are the crowns of creation, made in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*). They are rational animals, meaning that human actions manifest intelligence and free will in the visible world. Since they are able to know truth and consciously choose the good, they also are able to love. Yet John Paul II asks us to consider that it is not *just* their intellect which proclaims the mystery of God, but even their very bodies. We can say that the creation of man as male and female is not irrelevant to their imaging God, but in fact reveals an aspect of the Divine Life which is inextricable from Christian Revelation – that God is a Communion of Persons.

God is a Trinity (three Persons, one Nature), an eternal exchange of love and life. How are we to understand that the body makes this fact visible? What aspect of the body gives us the right to say this? The very reality of our sexual nature: our creation as male and female, and our call to share in a created version of the Eternal Union – the one flesh union. This earthly exchange of love is 'the primordial sacrament' of God's life-giving love.<sup>8</sup> In the Trinity, the Father and Son's love is so powerful and intimate that, from all eternity, another Divine Person – the Holy Spirit proceeds from this love. In an amazing image of the inner life of God, a man and woman come together, and their union is so intimate that they co-operate in producing another human person, whose very existence is a sign of the love they share.

Masculinity and femininity *together* symbolise God's love. John Paul II calls this the nuptial (marital, spousal or conjugal) meaning of the body.<sup>9</sup> It enables the person to express love and give himself or herself as a gift. Without this sexual complementarity, union would be impossible. By giving himself or herself as a gift to the other, the person fulfils the very meaning of their existence - to love as God loves.<sup>10</sup> In our bodies, we see the call to communion. The male or female body doesn't make sense on its own - without knowing what a woman was, one could never make sense of the male body and vice versa! This spousal meaning of the body is also inseparable from the life-giving meaning of the body. True love is always fruitful. The very source of human life is rooted into the complementarity of the spouses. In the order of creation, love and life are inseparable because in the Triune God, they are one.

The capacity to unite to another person in the body not only reflects the Divine Life, but also allows the body of each spouse to manifest their inner spiritual realities. The spiritual reality of their marriage (a lifelong, total, exclusive and fruitful relationship) is manifested in their bodies as they give themselves totally to the other, and receive the fullness of the other, in an exclusive union which is open to life. Through this they participate in the goodness and gift of the other person. They mutually confirm and affirm one another as whole persons (body and soul), not just as pieces of meat. When one makes a gift of themselves to the other, they are received, and the one receiving gives the gift of themselves in return, they both echo the voice of the Creator saying, 'Behold, it is good you exist. I affirm the



goodness of your whole being.' That is the experience of communion. Many people complain that the Church's teaching on sex and marriage is cold, but how many people wish they didn't have to go beneath the surface and could simply 'use someone' for a while? Whose version of sexual union is cold?

When Scripture tells us that Adam and Eve were 'naked without shame', it shows they had a full awareness of the original meaning of the body as the revelation of the full spiritual reality of the person, and the call to unite and reflect God's love. They saw the full dignity of the person and all they desired was to uphold that dignity. There was no fear because they loved one another, and 'perfect love casts out fear.'<sup>11</sup> Nakedness was an experience of purity which is nothing other than the ability to see the mystery of the person (intimacy as *in-to-me-see*) through the body rather than *something to use*. Exterior nakedness, we might say, revealed internal nakedness.

Yet with the occurrence of sin, this primordial sacrament and 'language of the body' was distorted. A rejection of the order of reality (rooted in a rejection of God as God), disrupted the unity between the sexes. Adam and Eve could no longer clearly read the language of the body. Their new 'hardness of heart' meant that they experienced their call to communion as the desire to take from the other. Just as eating disorders involve eating apart from the truth of the body and nutrition, so too sexual disorders involve sexual activity apart from the spousal meaning of the body. Lust is uninspired sexual desire that is without true love and intelligibility. It fragments the sexual act focussing on one aspect rather than the full truth about the body, person and life. Lust seeks the pleasure (emotional or physical) without the respect for the other person created for their own sake. The cure is not the removal of sexual desire (which is impossible), but the redemption of sexual desire - to recognise within it the mystery of life and love. >

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Man And Woman He Created Them*, p.313.

<sup>2</sup> www.abs.gov.au

<sup>3</sup> Gen 1:27

<sup>4</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, p.11

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Man And Woman He Created Them*, p.662

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.661

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 36:26

<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Man And Woman He Created Them*, p.203

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 4:18